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ABSTRACT

Writing techniques espoused by Peter Elbow, applied to the teaching of writing in advertising copywriting classes can help students develop into better writers, generating better copy ideas. The shift of focus from writing a finished piece the first time to concentrating on the process of writing allows for a freer flow of ideas and creativity. The procedure has eight steps, some of which can be repeated as often as necessary: warm-up, process writing, sharing, revision, sharing, revision, editing group sharing, and revision. The warm-up gets the writer focused on the flow of writing. Process writing, 15-20 minutes of directed freewriting using any of 13 different approaches (such as first thoughts, dialogues, and narrative thinking) to thinking about the topic, fosters both creativity and control over the topic. Sharing and editing take place in groups of students, the sharing groups concentrating on ideas rather than grammar and syntax. Assignments are turned in to the instructor only after going through several drafts and after editing by an editing group. By participating in sharing and editing groups, students essentially learn by teaching. As a result of using these techniques, the instructor's role changes from a grammar and mechanics corrector to that of a writing partner, guiding the students to the clear expression of their ideas. (SR)

Overcoming Fear and Loathing in Advertising Copywriting Courses.

A Paper Presented to
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ABSTRACT

Much of an instructor's time and effort in advertising copywriting classes is taken up with routine grading and "correcting" of papers. This tedious task can be reduced dramatically and result in students generating better ideas and producing better written copy by implementing techniques espoused by Peter Elbow for English composition classes. The techniques are easily incorporated into existing advertising copywriting class structures and can help students develop into better writers, who are more comfortable with writing, as well as generating better copy ideas.

INTRODUCTION

Why is it that the teaching of writing in advertising, especially copywriting, rarely results in producing very many people who can actually write copy well? Out of of class of 20 or so students--many of whom are dragged kicking and screaming into the class in the first place--maybe, just maybe, one will show strong potential for copywriting. What about that one person? If forced to think about her, we would all probably have to admit that she came into the class writing well and the best we could do for her is to get out of her way. And the rest? We rationalize that, in the least, we cleaned up their grammar and spelling some and possibly caused them to realize that the advertising writing process is difficult, a lot of hard work, and best left to those who have real talent. Then we send them off to become media planners, account executives or media sales reps—anything but copywriters.

In doing this semester after semester, we tend to perpetuate myths about writing—myths many of us probably learned from our own teachers, all the way back to grade school. Myths like, "writing is too difficult a task for the faint at heart." Or, "the mechanics of writing can be taught, but creativity is inborn." All of these can be summed up in the grandest myth of all: "writers are special people with special talents." Implicit in this myth is the notion that "if you gotta ask how its done, you ain't never gonna know."

Our advertising copywriting textbooks reinforce these myths. Philip Ward Burton [1] in the preface of his book says:

> Some people have a heaven-sent ability to think creatively and originally. They have this, book or no book. A copywriter can be trained but there are some who are naturals. They are born with the ability to spark original ideas just as there are artists, poets, and musicians whose talent shines through almost from the moment of birth.

Imagine yourself as a student of advertising reading that statement. It doesn't leave much hope for you if you have doubts that you were born with this talent to produce "copy that sings." And, what do we do with those students who doubt that they were born with the ability to write brilliant copy? Over the course of a semester or two of copywriting classes we convince them that they were right in doubting their abilities. Along the way we correct their grammar and spelling mistakes, help them with sentence structure, teach them "ideation" techniques and give them a "C" or a "B" for effort.

The purpose of this paper is to present some ideas about writing—not just copywriting, but all kinds of writing. These ideas are not especially new; many of them have been around for a decade or more in a few high school and college English composition courses. One can only guess why these techniques have not gained widespread acceptance, except that they tend to make traditionalists who focus on the mechanics of writing greatly uncomfortable. Perhaps the biggest reason why many teachers of writing are uncomfortable with this

approach is that it shifts the perspective from writing as a means to an end to writing as a process. This is an especially revolutionary perspective in advertising writing where writing is indeed taught as a means to a very specific end as demanded by marketplace considerations.

The techniques described in this paper do not negate writing for a purpose. Indeed, writing without a purpose is just so much intellectual masturbation—it may be self-gratifying, but it rarely results in conception. These techniques keep the writer focused on the purpose, but allow for a greater concentration on the process of writing. And by concentrating on process, the writer ultimately fulfills the purpose, whatever the purpose may be.

THE TECHNIQUES

The reason why most of us and most of our students, if pressed, will admit that we really don't like writing very much at all is that we have been taught from the beginning to write the finished piece. It is common for us and for our students to try to write something right the first time.

When we sit down, fingers poised above the keyboard, we sit with a built-in critic perched on our shoulders, peering at and critically evaluating each word as it appears in front of us. Perhaps after some false starts and some backspaces, we have a paragraph in front of us. This paragraph leads to another and another and eventually we run out of paragraphs.

Or, we begin with an outline of what we want to say and write to fill out the outline.

Either way, we are focused on the end product. The finished piece. If we do any revising at all, it is mostly in the form of editing: strike that, leave that, invert those words, kill that paragraph, replace one word with another. We attack the piece and pare it down to something lean and trim, but often lifeless. Instead of an act of creativity, it sounds more like warfare.

This also describes the typical grading process. It's no wonder students go away from writing classes looking defeated. They've gone up against the dreaded red pen and lost. The techniques described here eliminate the built-in critic, or at least put him in a state of suspended animation, long enough to get valid ideas, points, points of view and words down on paper which are then, and only then, subjected to revision—not editing. Editing comes later in the process.

These techniques have been taken mostly from Peter Elbow's book, Writing With Power [2]. Elbow was the founder of the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College, a small liberal arts college in upstate New York. This writer attended a week-long workshop at Bard during the summer of 1985 and has implemented many of the techniques learned there in advertising copywriting classes. Jerome Jewler briefly describes one part of the process in his book, Creative Strategy in Advertising [3].

The procedure has around eight steps. As can be seen below, some of the steps are repeated and can be repeated as often as necessary. Each of these steps is listed below and will be described in some detail:

1. Warm-up
2. Process writing
3. Sharing
4. Revision
5. Sharing
6. Revision
7. Editing group sharing
8. Revision

Warm-up:

Just as a musician would not begin playing without first warming up, the warm-up in the writing process is designed to get the writer focused on writing without worrying about whether it is right. The goal is simply to write. Elbow calls this "freewriting."

The rules of freewriting are simple. The writer begins writing at a predetermined time and writes anything at all for about ten minutes, non-stop. If the writer can't think of anything to write about, she simply writes "I'm stuck. I can't think of anything to write about." over and over until she becomes unstuck. A great deal of the time, freewriting ends up writing about writing. This is good. It helps the writer think about the writing process, and thinking about the writing process helps the writer write.

In classes, it works well to have the students freewrite as soon as they come into the room. This does two things.

First, it gets the students' minds shifted to the current class and away from whatever they just left. Second, it relaxes them and warms them up to writing.

Some students dread freewriting, that is until they get into it. Some students use it to write journals. Some just write whatever happens to be on their minds at that time. Most don't want to stop at the end of the allotted time.

As will be seen later, sharing of writing with others is an integral component of this technique. However, sharing of freewriting is only rarely done, and then only by those who want to share with others what they have written. It is also essential that the instructor freewrite along with the students. This shows that it is not just busy-work to fill time, sets the instructor up as a serious writer too, and even helps the instructor focus on the writing process. Occasionally, the instructor may choose to share her freewriting with the students, or not. If the instructor usually lectures for awhile before giving the writing assignment, then freewriting could be done after the lecture. In actual practice, it might be a good idea to do it at both the beginning of the class and right before beginning writing for an assignment.

Process Writing:

Elbow calls this type of writing "loop writing." In essence it is directed freewriting. It offers both control

and creativity over the topic. He refers to it as a looping process because it:

> …takes you on an elliptical orbiting voyage. For the first half, the *voyage out*, you do pieces of almost-freewriting during which you allow yourself to curve out into space—allow yourself, that is, to ignore or even forget exactly what your topic is For the second half, the *voyage home*, you bend your efforts back into the gravitational field of your original topic as you select, organize, and revise parts of what you produced during the voyage out (p.60).

Notice that the voyage out is characterized by creativity and the voyage home is characterized by control. Elbow details 13 loop writing techniques in his book, these are:

1. First thoughts
2. Prejudices
3. Instant version
4. Dialogues
5. Narrative thinking
6. Stories
7. Scenes
8. Portraits
9. Vary the audience
10. Vary the writer
11. Vary the time
12. Errors
13. Lies

First Thoughts. This is a good technique for getting started. The goal is to spend 15 to 20 minutes writing down all the thoughts that come to you before you do any reading, researching or new thinking about your topic. Just put down all the thoughts, feelings and impressions you have about the topic. Students are often surprised at how much they already know about the topic (product or whatever) and can remember.

Prejudices. This is another good one to start with. The idea in this exercise is to write, again for at least fifteen minutes nonstop, what your biases are on this topic. If

students complain that they don't have any biases about the product, remind them of how many of them groaned in agony when the assignment was presented. Elbow suggests that the writer try to become an extremist and write his views if your own biases don't immediately surface.

Instant Version. This is what most students (and many of us) want to do when given a writing task. The goal here is to deny the need to research and plan and to write the final version. This may mean leaving out large chunks of information to be supplied later, but this technique does often lead to a conclusion and/or strong parts that may be kept for the real final version.

Dialogues. This is one of the better loop writing techniques for advertising writing. The goal here is to engage in conversation, or dialogue, with a person representing an opposing point of view, a person representing a supporting point of view, someone who knows more than you about the topic, or anyone or anything that helps put the topic and the major points in *speech*. Jewler suggests that the student engage in a dialogue with the product itself. This is just one way of implementing this technique. The idea is to produce conversation. Since this is one of the hardest things to get students to do in an advertising writing class, this technique helps that process along as well as helping to get ideas on paper.

Narrative Thinking. This technique is good if your topic is complicated or contains a great deal of technical

information. The idea is to write the story of your thinking. Simply tell what you thought first, then what you thought about that and what you thought about after that and so on. This technique helps untangle thoughts and may help pull out the most important points.

Stories. This and the next technique are both readily adaptable to an advertising style of writing. Elbow suggests writing a story or stories about the topic. In the case of an advertising writing assignment, the exercise easily could be modified so that the students were to write stories about someone using the product. Or, they could write stories about some time in their life when they used the product, or someone they knew who used the product. In writing this story, the students should be encouraged to develop details about the people, the scene, the time of day and so on, drawing on their memories and experiences. This technique often leads to rich visualization that is readily adaptable to any medium, but especially radio and television.

Scenes. This is similar to "stories" but the idea is to stop time and record visually what is taking place in conjunction with the topic. What colors, places, moments, sounds and so on are evoked by the topic? It is sometimes useful to have the students record not only the good scenes, but the bad as well. For instance, if writing about an automobile, instead of writing only about the good scenes like cruising down the highway with the top down on a pretty

spring day, writing about getting tickets or breakdowns may produce some surprises that could be incorporated into copy.

Portraits. Advertising writers often have difficulty writing to one person—although the best copywriters have long held that this is the key to good copy. This technique helps that process along. The idea is simple: think about the product and see what people come to mind. It is not necessary to go into great detail about these people, just write simple thumbnail sketches of them. Some people will be obvious, but let others enter your imagination and write about them. If someone in your distant past comes to mind, such as an old boyfriend, trust that your mind has made some connection between the product and that person and write about him.

Vary the Audience. This technique forces a different point of view. If the audience for your message is sophisticated and upscale, write to someone entirely different. If the audience is educated, try writing to a young child. By doing these, the writer is forced to explain things as they might not otherwise.

Vary the Writer. This is another way to force a different point of view. Write as though you were from a different culture. Write as though you were the child and you were writing to an adult. For students, it is sometimes helpful to have them write as though they were much older. When doing this, it is sometimes necessary to tell them some of the things that come with being older, like mortgages and

children, creaky joints and slowing down. A fun exercise is to have them write about the product to someone who just arrived here from another planet. This forces them to explain things that they might otherwise assume everyone knew.

Vary the Time. Similar to the above two techniques, in this exercise the goal is to write from the perspective of someone living in the distant past or the distant future. The commercial for Pepsi in which a future archaeologist comes across a Coke bottle and is unable to identify it, may have come from this kind of thinking.

Errors. This is somewhat of a difficult technique to apply to advertising. The goal is to write down things that are untrue or partially untrue about the product, yet may be believed by people. For instance, if writing about computers you may write that they are hard to use, subject to frequent failures and so on. On the other hand, if you were writing about a candy bar, it may be harder to come up with errors. But, a little thinking and writing may unearth some. These errors may help formulate convincing copy to counter them.

Lies. This is another fun technique. The procedure is to write as many outright lies about the product as you can. Lie about the manufacturing, the ingredients, the company, the product performance, and so on. The more fantastical, the better. Such thinking may lead to copy approaches like the Keebler elves--obviously a fantasy--or the Isuzu

commercials in which they admit that the spokesman lies throughout.

The instructor should give students about fifteen to twenty minutes to do these exercises. Like freewriting, students should be instructed to write nonstop. Often, students "get on a roll" and don't want to stop at the stopping point. That's o.k., let them keep going. Usually they will stop within a couple of minutes and you can go to another exercise. Since this type of nonstop writing is physically and mentally tiring, it is a good idea to give a break by letting some of the students share their writings out loud with the class before going on to another exercise.

Obviously, an instructor wouldn't want to do all 13 exercises during one class or lab period. This would be too time consuming. Some of the exercises may lend themselves easily to particular products, others may be useful for different products or services. But over the course of the first several lab periods all of the exercises should be introduced. Then the students will have them available for use in writing out of class.

These loop-writing techniques are tremendously useful in generating ideas. Typically the student will find herself with more ideas than can be used in one piece of copy. After the exercises she then takes these embryonic ideas and organizes them into the appropriate copy structure. This, then, becomes her first draft—not the one that is turned in

for grading—but the one she shares with her peers for initial feedback.

Sharing:

This is a crucial component of the writing/thinking process. In the usual advertising writing class, the student writes the assignment, gives it to the teacher, who then writes comments and gives it back to the student with a grade attached. Occasionally, we may have conferences with students to tell them our comments instead of writing them. Before long, the brighter students learn to "read" the instructor and begin writing to please that person only. At the worst, students continue to make the same mistakes on subsequent assignments and we wonder why they can't remember our comments from assignment to assignment.

The thing that we forget in classroom writing exercises is that writing is meant to see the light of day. Advertising writing, especially, is meant to be public. Yet, we keep the writing private—between the instructor and the student. She writes to me, I write back to her. She learns to write to one person, but unfortunately that one person is the instructor.

Sharing is done in groups. Sharing is done after the first draft and after subsequent revisions. The groups vary from time to time so that the student is continually exposing her work to different people. It is not necessary to have the same group listen to subsequent drafts as heard the first

one. Group size should be kept to about five or six people at the most. This gives everyone the opportunity to read their work and obtain feedback from their peers. Feedback is the goal of group sharing.

Before putting students into feedback groups, it is essential that they learn a few ground-rules, so that no one feels that she or her writing is being "attacked" by the group.

First, while it may be tempting for the group to focus on grammar and syntax, the goal is to concentrate on ideas and themes. Thus, no "editing" comments are allowed at this time. Second, students are taught to actively listen to the writing by following a few guidelines:

1. Use active listening. Tell what you think the writer is trying to communicate by restating what has been written, either by paraphrasing, summarizing the gist of what has been read, or using most of the writer's own words.

2. As the piece is being read, jot down words or phrases that catch your attention. What about those words makes them stand out? What parts of the piece do you like best? How do these parts affect you? Be sure to respond to specific sections of the writing. A general response like, "I like it," or "That was good," is not very helpful.

3. Let the writer know if there is anything in the writing that seems confusing, out of place, unclear. Explain why you are bothered by that particular section.

4. Ask the writer:
   (a) Where do <u>you</u> feel you had a problem?
   (b) Where do <u>you</u> feel you were successful?
   (c) How else can this group help you?

Initially, students will feel uncomfortable in the group sharing. Keep in mind that they're used to wanting to know what you, as the instructor, think about they're writing and are somewhat unwilling to trust their peers. Soon, they will automatically form into groups to share and will not even wait for groups to be assigned. It is also a good idea for the instructor to monitor the groups occasionally to make sure that they are tending to business.

Revision:

After the student has obtained feedback on her work, then comes the revision process. Taking the comments and suggestions of her peers, and any new ideas she has herself, she then forms the second draft of her piece. And, when she's ready, she can then share this draft with another group. After which, she may choose to revise again and continue this process until she feels she is ready to take her work to an editing group.

Editing Groups:

These groups are established much like the feedback groups, but they're main responsibility is editing. By making each person in the group responsible for the editing of a piece it takes much of the burden of "grading by editing" off of the instructor's shoulders and makes each student more conscious of grammar, spelling, syntax, punctuation and the like. At this point, it is helpful if each student in an editing group be given a copy of the written work.

The editing group also operates in a manner more like the "real world" in that rarely is the writer totally responsible for her own editing. Essentially, the students learn by teaching.

When the piece has been through several drafts and been edited by an editing group, then and only then, is the assignment turned in to the instructor.

The Role of the Instructor:

When these techniques are followed, the job of the instructor is made at once easier and harder. The job is made easier because the instructor becomes less of a villain--someone to be feared, and if possible, overcome--and more of a writing partner. That, however, makes the job harder. The instructor has to resist grading-by-editing and focus more on what the student is trying to say. The most effective way for teachers to reduce the task of "correcting papers" is to transfer the evaluation process as much as possible to the feedback and editing groups and to the individual student. She must keep the feedback groups and the editing groups on track. She must be willing to sacrifice some deadlines in favor of revisions. She must, above all, show her seriousness about writing by joining in and writing along with the students. Occasionally, she may join a feedback group and respond to writing as a peer. This, of course, means that she must be a complete partner in the process by

sharing some of her writings as well. She must also learn some new evaluation techniques.

These evaluation techniques are similar to what goes on in feedback groups and editing groups. Essentially, the instructor serves as both. Some instructions on grading and evaluation to the instructor, therefore, are necessary:

1. Validate through active listening and supportive comments what the student has said successfully or is trying to say.

2. Draw out the student's meaning and intention through listening and questions. Do not appropriate the student's text and try to make it the teacher's version.

3. Suggest some writing that the student can do immediately to get started on a revision: freewriting, loop-writing, outlining, etc. New writing gets the student away from "fixing" a piece.

4. Respond to composing and idea issues before editing issues. Remember a feedback group meets before an editing group. Some of the sentences that have grammatical errors in them may not appear in subsequent drafts. Respond first to content and organization and in the later drafts to grammar and mechanics.

5. Respect the student's work. Respond in pencil or blue or black ink, not red. Write clearly and neatly in the margin and not on the text.

CONCLUSION:

The techniques being proposed here work. They won't guarantee that every student who comes into your class will leave as a first-rate writer. The good writers will become much better. The ones in the middle will improve both their ideation and their mechanics. The poorer writers will

improve, sometimes with surprising success. There are, though, those who come into any class who are lazy and will refuse to do more than the minimum expected. They will resist and revert to their old habits as soon as they can because the processes described here are a lot of hard work.

The successes of these techniques are difficult to measure quantitatively because the evaluation of writing is terribly subjective. However, some success stories of anecdotal nature might serve to provide some evidence of the fruitfulness of these exercises. In advertising writing classes this writer has seen:

> students who didn't want to stop writing at the end of the class;
>
> feedback groups formed voluntarily to meet out of class to discuss each other's writing;
>
> students who asked to write more than one ad for an assignment because they "had too many good ideas;"
>
> students who have said that they have used the same techniques in their English composition classes;
>
> students who have shown a greater confidence in their writing abilities;
>
> and, students who have told me they now write for their own pleasure—just because they want to.

It is not suggested that these techniques supplant the teaching of advertising copywriting principles. There is still room for creative strategy development, the search for the "big benefit," for development of styles and formats particular to specific media. There is still room to stress deadlines. Indeed, some of the loop-writing techniques described above can actually help produce better copy in

short deadline situations. These techniques are easily incorporated into the standard advertising copywriting course structure. But, they also allow the student to examine, probably for the first time, the process of writing and how it is done.

It may seem obvious that a writing course should focus on writing. But, the usual tack is to focus on the written piece and what is wrong with it, instead of the route to get to a well written piece with a great idea. These techniques work well to encourage both the student and the instructor to examine the writing process and to learn from it how to become better, less fearful writers.

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